

Questions and Comments Professors NEVER Want to Hear (and suggested ways to ask your question or make your comment)

Is this going to be on the test?

This question suggests you are only interested in being responsible or accountable for the information you will be tested on. The committed student brings to class an intellectual curiosity, realizing that every text has a context. Try substituting, Why is that? How does this make a difference? Or even, Would you repeat that point with a different example?

Sorry I missed class. Did anything important happen?

Such a comment invites a smug reply, which most professors will refrain from delivering. Try to see such a comment as this one as rather thoughtless—it places the speaker at the center of the world, suggesting that because of his or her absence nothing at all went on in class. This is an insult to both your peers and your professor. Try substituting, Sorry I missed class. I will take responsibility and get notes from one of my classmates.

I realize your class is closed, but it fits perfectly into my schedule. Sign my add slip.

Good manners go a long way in endearing you with the professor. You might want to shift the focus off yourself and try a more subtle attempt to gain admission. Try substituting, I realize your class is closed, but I have had a life-long interest in this subject. I promise you I will come to class every session, take good notes, participate responsibly, study hard, and make you glad you decided to let me in. Will you consider signing my add slip?

I put my paper in your box/under your door/in an e-mail to you. I don't know why you didn't get it.

Most professors like to receive papers, projects, reports, etc., during class on the day they are due. It is too easy for a paper to wind up in the wrong box, under the wrong door, or get lost in cyberspace. If you must send a paper to your professor outside of class, it is your responsibility to conduct a follow-up check with your professor to make sure he or she actually received the paper. It is not the professor's responsibility to be surprised at where he or she will bump into your paper. It is your responsibility to make a plan and see if your professor is amenable to receiving the paper outside of class.

You gave me a B/C/D/F on this paper. It is clear to me I deserve an A/better grade.

When professors evaluate your work, they bring to the task years of professional judgment. They are the ones who are best suited to determine your grade. If you already know what grade you should receive, then you should either not be taking the class or teaching it yourself. Try substituting, I didn't do as well on my last assignment as I would like. Please explain how this grade was assigned. Something must be wrong with the way I am preparing/studying/approaching/writing. I wonder if I might meet with you so that I can improve my efforts on our next assignment.

You are wrong about what you just said.

Professors have spent years studying their respective subjects and should be expected to know what they are saying, but certainly they can make mistakes. If you find your professor contradicts something you have read in the class text, by all means point out politely the discrepancy. Try substituting, I hear what you are saying, but how do I reconcile that point with what the author says in our text on page 22? It could be just as likely the text is incorrect.

Will you write me a letter of recommendation for a scholarship/summer job/graduate school/campus award/etc.?

Professors fully expect to support their students by writing letters, but HOW you ask for the letter is important. First, you need to make sure the professor knows you and your work well enough to write a responsible and positive letter. Try substituting, I know you are busy, but do you feel that you know my work well enough to write me a positive letter of recommendation? I would certainly appreciate your taking the time to do so. I have all the information here you will need, including a stamped, addressed envelope. The deadline is in two weeks. Is there anything else you need from me in order to write the letter?

Sorry I overslept and missed the exam. When can I take a make up?

Professors do not necessarily prepare make up exams, especially when students miss the exam for reasons that are vague or generic. Try substituting, I really messed up—it is my fault—and if you want to hear the story, I would be happy to tell you. I don't know your policy on make up exams, but if you could find it in the kindness of your heart to help me out this time, I would never make this mistake again. Professors understand that mistakes happen or that events in the residence hall might prevent you from your work. Be honest and ask for mercy. You may just get it!

Can we get out early today?

For most classes, there may not be an attendance policy, and we are all adults. If you want to miss class, don't come, but never ask your professor to cut short his or her plans for the class meeting. Do ball teams leave the park before the game is over?

Can we meet outside today?

Meeting outside in good weather offers a wide assortment of possibilities for distraction. When a student asks such a question, the professor may well assume that students would rather be distracted than pay attention to what he or she has to say. If the weather is nice, let your professor make the first offer to go outside.

I am offended that you just tried to teach me something.

Professors often look for “teachable moments,” which are situations that open the door for making a broader point or a learning opportunity even if it was not what the student had in mind. For example, once a student asked a professor by e-mail for directions to the professor's office. The professor saw this as a “teachable moment” and sent the student a link to a campus map that not only showed how to get to the professor's office, but the professor thought that this would be a nice resource for the student to use in the future for finding other campus locations. Instead, the student sent an e-mail reply to the professor saying that he/she was offended that a map was sent instead of simple directions. Keep this in mind because professors take their job to teach seriously and often look for every opportunity to do so. Just think of how much you can learn from professors, even when you least expect it!